

# It Had To Be Done

By Patrick Ercolano

**W**hy? Why, when working for the Nazis as a supervisor of Scandinavian political prisoners, did Hiltgunt Zassenhaus risk her life by furtively aiding her captives and eventually saving 1,200 of them from execution at the end of World War

II?

"Were you not for Hitler? Were the Norwegians and Danes not your enemies? Did you not have a lover in the prisons?" she says in her strong German accent, reciting some of the questions people have asked her in the past 40 years.

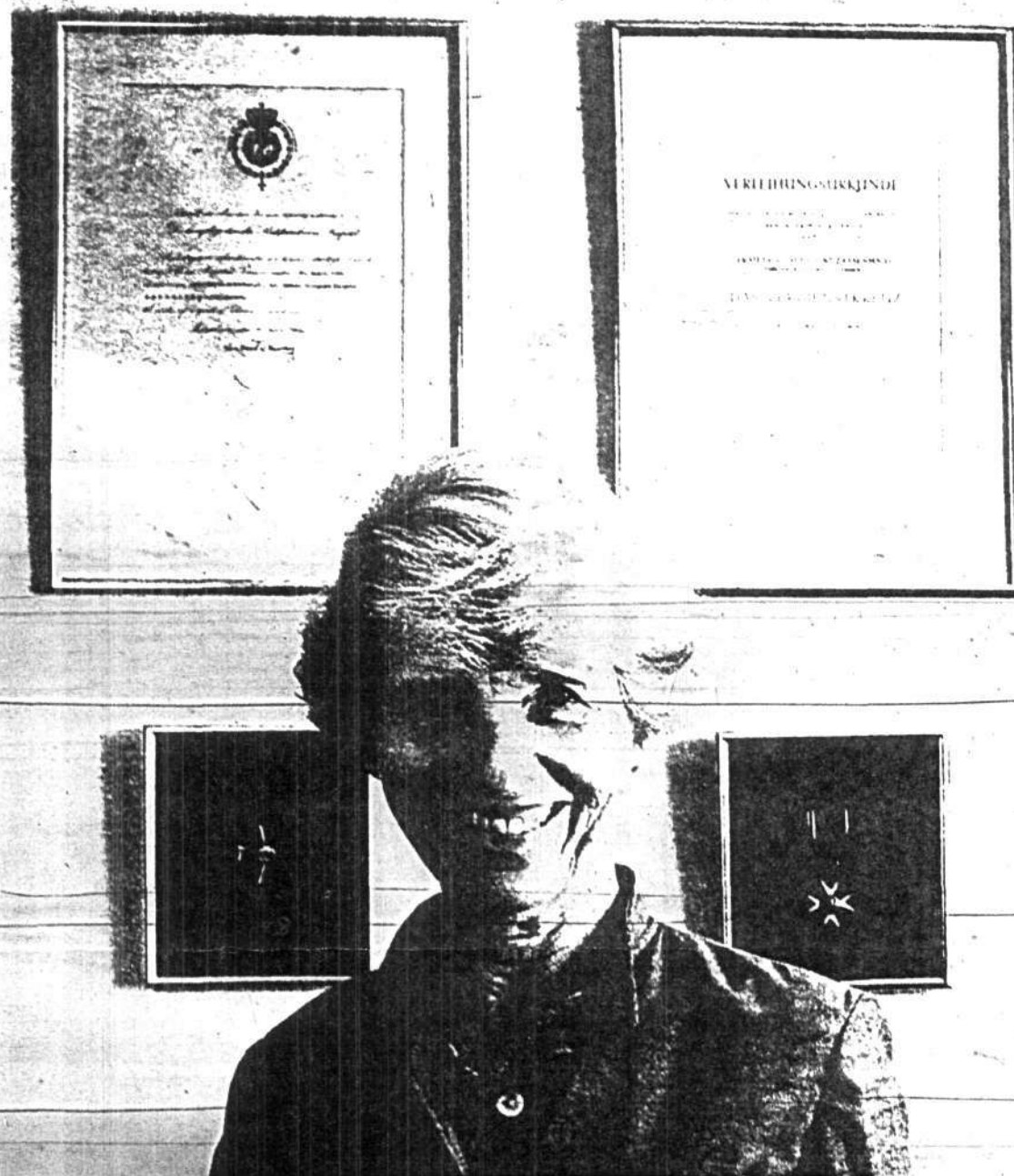
"Always they ask, 'Why did you do it?,' and always I answer, 'Why didn't others do it?' There's no lengthy explanation. It had to be done, out of common decency."

A small, animated woman, Hiltgunt Margret Zassenhaus, 69, is a doctor of internal medicine and has been living in the Baltimore area since coming to the United States in 1952. She sees her patients in the basement office of her home in Towson. The medals she received from the governments of Norway, Denmark and West Germany, framed and hanging on the living room wall, are the only wartime souvenirs that adorn her house.

Of people who make a happy hobby of collecting World War II memorabilia, the 1974 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize says, "Obviously they have never been in a real war. Anyway, I would rather they collect memorabilia of peace."

For Dr. Zassenhaus, the war began in late 1932. One of her high school teachers assigned her to attend a mass rally near her home town of Hamburg.

Patrick Ercolano is a features reporter for The Evening Sun.



Hiltgunt Zassenhaus with her war medals from three governments.

Adolf Hitler, the head of Germany's burgeoning National Socialist party, was to speak. The 16-year-old Hiltgunt had never heard Hitler before, and in her essay on the rally, she wrote, "The loudness of his voice can silence you, but it cannot convince." She closed by declaring, "Hitler is a psychotic!"

Her teacher gave the essay an A. But less than two months later, after Hitler became chancellor, criticism of the Nazis and their leader had become verboten, and even a teen-age girl could meet with trouble for showing defiance.

The new government had issued an order: When a teacher entered a classroom, the students had to stand, raise their right arms in salute and shout "Heil Hitler!" The first morning that the new order took effect, young Hiltgunt was the only student in her class to refuse. Her teacher, the same one who had admired the anti-Hitler essay, told the girl she would be wise to comply with the salute order.

That evening Hiltgunt, a name that in old German means "struggle," discussed the dilemma with her parents, Julius and Margret. They told her she would have to make up her own mind.

"From the start, my parents exposed my three

brothers and me to values that revered life," she says. "They read often to us from the works of Albert Schweitzer. When my father was ill with Parkinson's disease, we took turns walking with him along the Elbe River. There he would tell us how important it was to form opinions and to have the courage to stand by them, that people have a conscience and choices."

There was something else behind her refusal to make the salute. Immediately after Hitler's election on Jan. 30, 1933, the Nazis had removed Julius Zassenhaus from his headmastership of a city-run Hamburg high school for girls. Because he was well known in the town for his democratic beliefs and his books on religion and ethics, two black-shirted men from the SS (Schutzstaffel), the dreaded Nazi security force, had come to the Zassenhaus home to take him to jail, but demurred when they saw how sick he was.

"So they settled for taking his job away from him," Hiltgunt Zassenhaus says.

On the second day of the salute order, the school principal stopped by the room to see that every student — and one in particular — paid due homage to

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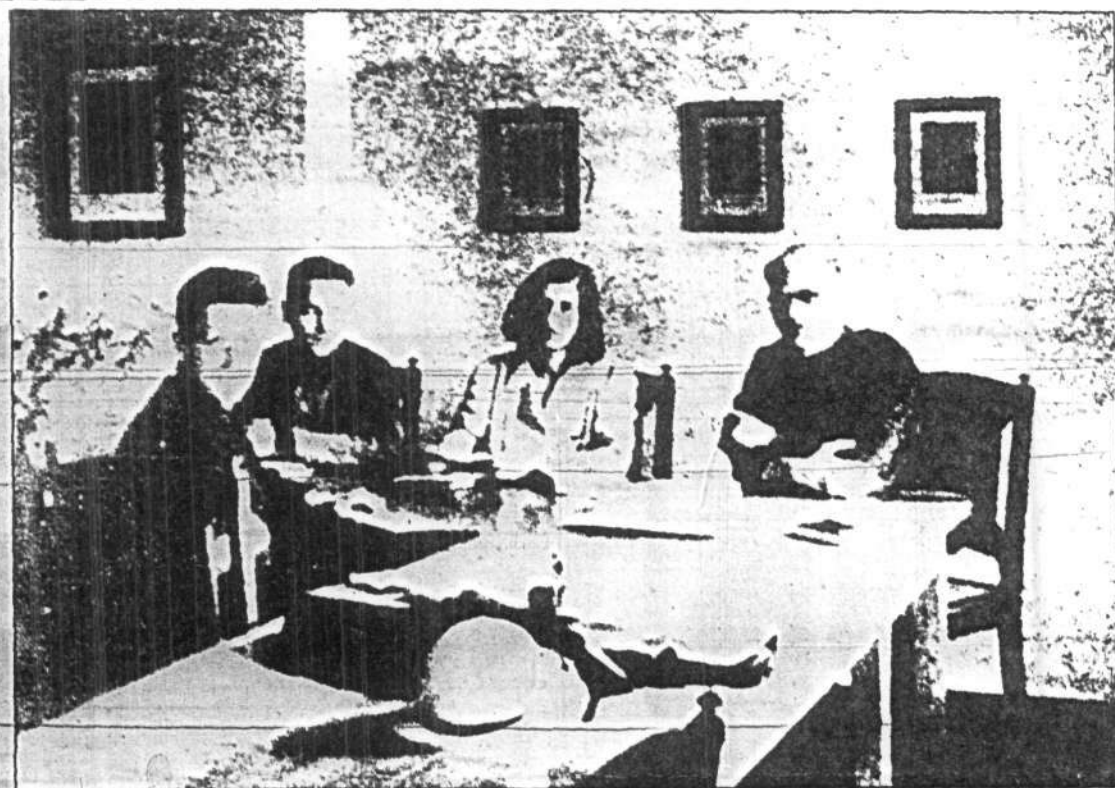


Photo taken by a Red Cross worker in 1943 shows Dr. Zassenhaus with Scandinavian prisoners.

THE SUN/DAVID HARR

Der Fuehrer. When the time came for the salute, the principal, the teacher and all of Hiltgunt's classmates anxiously turned their heads toward her position near a window at the rear of the room.

Would she or wouldn't she?

In a panic, she flung her left arm through the window and smashed the glass. A large piece of it pierced her arm, spilling her blood onto the floor.

"I did it out of desperation," she says. "I was enraged and felt I had to do something drastic, even if it was a pretty juvenile thing to do. I just did not want to budge for the Nazis."

She smiles when she describes the scene. "Everyone screamed. I was rushed to a doctor, and from then on, they left me alone."

For seven more years, in fact, she was left alone while earning a degree in Scandinavian languages from the University of Hamburg and taking medical classes at the same institution. Then the Department of Justice summoned her with a job — "a special assignment," they called it. Because of her degree in an uncommon field of study, the Germans assigned her to censor mail written by Jews in Polish ghettos to friends and relatives in Scandinavia.

This, she realized, was her opportunity to fight the Nazis in a way that went far beyond a school-girl's refusal to salute Hitler.

Instead of deleting passages from the letters, she scribbled messages in the margins. "Send food," she would write. "Send warm clothing." Later letters, expressing thanks for the items sent to Poland, confirmed for Hiltgunt Zassenhaus that her secret deeds were successful.

Soon she was ordered to censor letters written by Scandinavians — mostly authors, journalists and professors — who had been imprisoned in German camps for working against German occupation of Norway and Denmark. Again she added her own messages asking for help and offering hope.

The Germans decided in the spring of 1943 that the Scandinavian political prisoners could receive visits from clergymen, and that young Miss Zassenhaus would supervise these visits. Write down anything you hear that sounds suspicious, she was told, and make certain that no one prays or reads from the Bible during the visits.

Just shy of her 27th birthday, she was being handed a more responsible role inside the Nazi government. Now she would have the chance to do even more for the enemies of her homeland — even if it meant putting herself at greater risk.

About 20 prisoners participated in each visit. At first they were suspicious of Miss Zassenhaus, but when they found that she had written the messages in their letters, they warmed to her. Later she smuggled food, medicine and writing supplies to the

prisoners.

She started to sneak medicine, particularly vitamins, to the prisoners after hearing her anatomy professor apologize to his students for the scrawny corpses they had been working on in class — corpses, he said casually, that came from Nazi concentration camps.

Carrying the supplies in bulging suitcases, she walked right past the armed guards. She explained to them that the cases contained her personal possessions. In case of an air raid, she would say, she wanted to be able to get away with all her things. How did a young, soft-spoken woman of small physical stature manage to dupe the Nazis with such apparent ease?

"Simple enough: They feared me," Dr. Zassenhaus says. "True, the guards and the officials in these camps were very stern and authoritarian, but I was above them in rank because I worked for the Department of Justice."

"That's not what frightened them the most, though. You see, they couldn't even imagine that any ordinary young woman could have a post like mine, so they concluded that I was Gestapo. Everyone feared the Gestapo, and naturally they feared me."

"Make no mistake, I was afraid of them, too. I never knew if they might have heard something from an informer inside one of the prisons I visited. But I always tried to make the authorities more

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## Zassenhaus

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afraid of me than I was of them. If they asked me a probing question, I would turn it around and ask them an even more probing question, as if to say, 'How dare you doubt the Gestapo!'

"It was a continuous game. I was like an actor playing a part."

The part included saying "Heil, Hitler!" to every Nazi official she encountered. Refusing to say it, as she had done in her school days, would only make her appear suspicious. So she would raise her hand and mumble a similar-sounding phrase: "Drei liter" — in English, "Three liters."

"An insignificant point," she admits, "but at the time, it made me feel better."

During the war, she met with about 1,200 of the thousands of prisoners in 54 camps across Germany. For her own use, she made a record of every prisoner she saw, especially noting when someone was moved from one camp to another. These records would turn out to be crucial.

As a rule she commuted to the camps from her family's home in Hamburg. Her father had died a few years earlier, so with her three brothers at war, Hiltgunt lived with her mother. However, they were forced by official order to share their house with strangers after Allied bombs had leveled much of Hamburg.

In their own home, the Zassenhaus had to be careful of what they said and how loudly they said it; they would learn later that one of their "guests" was informing the Gestapo about another boarder. Even when working at home on the prisoners' letters, Hiltgunt Zassenhaus would lock herself in her room for fear of being found out by someone in the house.

Once she came across a piece of mail in which a prisoner had put down only three words, all in capital letters: "I AM ALIVE!" He had written the message just after learning he had been sentenced to death by the Nazis. She interpreted the short letter as a defiant and joyous declaration of life in the face of death. The prisoner, she believed, felt more aware of his existence than he ever had before because its end was within sight.

Similarly, Dr. Zassenhaus says, this period of performing urgent duty under such dangerous circumstances was when she has felt most alive in her life.

"It wasn't merely because a bomb could drop on you and kill you at any time, but because everything in the world, both the good and the bad, became more obvious," she explains. "Every moment, every sensation, everything became so vibrant and real."

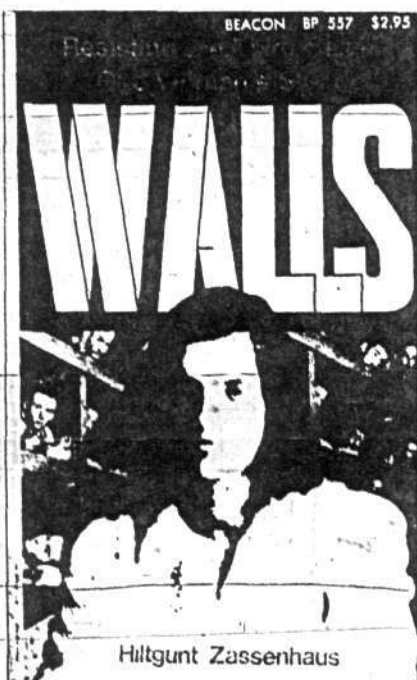
With the sense of danger came what she calls "an incredible freedom."

"It was a feeling I achieved by fo-

cusing entirely on the prisoners and trying as hard as I could to put fear from my mind," she says. "Also I carried a gun, which my position entitled me to do. If I had been caught, I would have used the gun to kill myself. Having the power to end my life anytime I chose made me feel free."

The possibility of using the gun on herself loomed larger as the war dragged on and she continued taking risks to help the prisoners. On three occasions, she was called into the Gestapo office in Hamburg. Each time she went in wondering whether she would be arrested. But she was asked only about her prisoners or the boarders at her house.

Early in 1945 the Nazis gave Miss Zassenhaus her biggest scare. The administrator of a prison outside Dresden rebuked her for not transcribing and translating her conversations with the men there and for allowing the Bible to be read.



Dr. Zassenhaus' book has been translated into 10 languages.

"I'll notify Berlin," he screamed, adding that he would report her directly to Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler.

She left the prison. Rather than wait to get picked up by the Nazis, she made plans to escape via the underground of what she called the "hidden Germany," the network of resistance fighters inside and outside the government. One of the insiders, for example, was the head of a Nazi prison for women, the daughter of a Hamburg shipping agent who provided her with many of the supplies she smuggled into the prisons.

But she was probably saved, ironically, by the destruction of Dresden. The Allied fire-bombing of the German city started soon after her meeting with the prison administrator, who, in the subsequent chaos, apparently failed to follow through on his threat to report her.

The end of the war was near, and the Nazis began tending to unfinished business. Hitler announced that the untold thousands of political prisoners in Germany would be executed on Day X, an imminent date that was known only to high-ranking officials.

Count Folke Bernadotte, the president of the Swedish Red Cross, heard about Day X and sent an urgent message to Himmler, who had attended college with the count. Count Bernadotte asked for the release of all the Scandinavians in the camps in Germany. Himmler agreed to the request, but said he had no idea where every captive, specifically every Scandinavian, was being held. If you want them, he said, go find them.

Enter Hiltgunt Zassenhaus and her records of her 1,200 Scandinavian prisoners. She learned of Day X through her underground connections, and through them sent her meticulous files of the Scandinavians' whereabouts to Bernadotte. Within days Red Cross buses pulled up to the camps listed in her records, and drove the 1,200 to safety in Denmark.

Day X came a week later. The political prisoners left behind in Germany were put on boats that were sent far out to sea and then sunk by the

**"Every moment, every sensation, everything became so vibrant and real."**

### **Dr. Hiltgunt Zassenhaus**

Nazis. "No one knows for sure how many were killed on Day X," Dr. Zassenhaus says, "but it was thousands and thousands and thousands."

After the war, she organized a relief effort for German orphans. The campaign lasted three years and included contributions from her former prisoners. Norway and Denmark gave her their highest civilian decorations, and in 1947 she became the first German to enter those countries after World War II. She was known as "the Angel of the Political Prisoners." In 1948, at the invitation of the Danish government, she went to the University of Copenhagen to complete her medical studies.

Around that time, she met William Amberson, a physiology professor at the University of Maryland's medical school, who was in Denmark for a doctors' conference. Impressed by her heroic story, Dr. Amberson told her to look him up in Baltimore when she finished her program at Copenhagen.

Taking Dr. Amberson up on his offer, Hiltgunt came to Baltimore in 1952 (she became a U.S. citizen in 1957). He helped her land a residency at City Hospital, where she stayed through 1954 before beginning her private practice.

"I wanted to come to the United States because during the dark years of the war I focused on the idea of the

lady holding the torch, the Statue of Liberty," says Dr. Zassenhaus. "To me, it was the torch of enlightenment. Also, I had seen too much in Europe. I had to leave."

She was the last member of her family to emigrate to America. The youngest of her three older brothers, Willfried, was killed on the Russian

front during the war, but her mother, her second oldest brother, Gunther (now a private internist in Los Angeles), and her oldest brother, Hans (a professor of mathematics at Ohio State University), had previously and separately left Europe for the same reason — they had "seen too much." After her arrival in Baltimore, Hilt-

gunt, who has never married, shared her home with her mother until Margaret Zassenhaus' death at age 77 in 1969.

For the last 20 years, Dr. Zassenhaus has been on the staff of the Greater Baltimore Medical Center.

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Dr. Hiltgunt Zassenhaus

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She also keeps busy as a public speaker and as a member of the board of directors of Baltimore Federal Financial and the Baltimore County Medical Society, the board of trustees of Roland Park Country School and the Maryland Humanities Council.

But it is her medical practice, she says, that is a continuation of her work against the Nazis. "The people I treat now are in pain for different reasons, but it is still pain. To me it's all the same body of work, except it was illegal to help people during the war."

Dr. Zassenhaus has written two books about her wartime experiences, "Halt Wacht im Dunkel" ("On Guard in the Dark") in 1948, and "Walls" (printed by Beacon Press) in 1974. The latter's international publication prompted her Nobel Peace prize nomination by the Norwegian government. Her story has also been told in a 1980 British documentary, "It Mattered To Me," which recently aired on Maryland Public Television and is scheduled to be shown again on MPT this winter.

"The memories are very much alive," she says. "They never die. I have to live with it but I'm not going to die about it. Still, I buy extra items of food at the market, just as we did during the war, because the experience was burned into me.

"I have seen so much death and destruction in my life, but I have also seen that it can be overcome. That's what keeps me going every day and gives me hope. I learned from the war that life, especially in a free and bountiful country such as the United States, is like a large table covered with Christmas presents. To enjoy life completely, we have to open up all those presents."

In the meantime, she warns, free people must guard against ignorance and indifference.

"That's how Hitler happened," she says. "Any society has many good people but they can become very indifferent to what's going on around them. And then you have a few evil people who manage to take advantage of that indifference. Hitler came to power not because the German people had certain convictions but because they had none.

"There were many fine people in Germany who went along with the Nazis. The economy was bad, so they simply threw up their hands and said, 'What can we do? Der Fuehrer must know something we don't know. Let him take care of the problems.' How many times do you hear people say, 'Washington knows something we don't know. Let them handle it.'"

"That certainly isn't to imply that the people in our government are Hitlers by any means, but we citizens have to guard against this type of indifference, which is a Hitler of the mind."

Of the 1,200 Scandinavian prisoners she helped save, about 600 are still alive. When Dr. Zassenhaus talks about them — "my prisoners," she fondly calls them — she smiles warmly and her eyes grow misty.

"We write to each other quite often," she says. "Many of them are government officials in their countries, so they come to Washington on business every once in a while, and we'll get together.

"My God, I was so fortunate. Any of the prisoners could have cracked or taken a bribe and then informed on me. But they didn't. I'm still alive, and that fact alone proves the great human quality of those men."

## Dust Bowl

Sometimes I feel the souls of the  
old people  
rising out of the earth  
as the wind blows the dust  
I watch the blood filling my  
veins  
listen to the music in my finger-  
tips  
know that I am an old man and  
father to be  
the spirits dwell in the mouths of  
guitars  
suck on an old harmonica reed  
and listen to it tell  
tales of see-saw and saw no

more  
people come and gone in their  
cars  
the dust bowl greater than us all  
the yellow-faced children  
streaked with dirt  
and joy revealing their belly-but-  
tons  
naked in the air by the car  
where the people  
stopped to rest....hot day.... long  
journey  
taking water from an old sweet  
well

—Harris Schiff

Harris Schiff is a poet living in  
Brooklyn, N.Y.